Still Misinterpreting Lie Scales: Reply to Feldman's Rejoinder

de Vries, R.E.; Hilbig, B.E.; Zettler, I.; Dunlop, P.D.; Holtrop, D.J.; Kibeom, Lee; Ashton, M.C.

2018

document version
Other version

Still Misinterpreting Lie Scales: Reply to Feldman's Rejoinder

De Vries, R. E., Hilbig, B. E., Zettler, I., Dunlop, P. D., Holtrop, D., Lee, K., & Ashton, M. C. (2018). *Still Misinterpreting Lie Scales: Reply to Feldman's Rejoinder.* Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Reinout E. de Vries

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and University of Twente, the Netherlands

Benjamin E. Hilbig

University of Koblenz-Landau, Germany

Ingo Zettler

University of Copenhagen, Denmark

Patrick D. Dunlop & Djurre Holtrop

University of Western Australia, Australia

Kibeom Lee

University of Calgary, Canada

Michael C. Ashton

Brock University, Canada

Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Reinout E. de Vries, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Department of Experimental and Applied Psychology, Van der Boechorststraat 1, 1081 BT, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, tel: +31-20-5988718, e-mail: re.de.vries@vu.nl

Abstract

Despite convincing counterevidence, misinterpretation of so-called Impression Management, Social Desirability, or Lie scales in low-stakes settings seems to persist. In this reply to an ongoing discussion with Feldman and colleagues (De Vries et al., 2017; Feldman, in press; Feldman et al., 2017), we argue that high scores on Impression Management and Lie scales in low-stakes settings are more likely to reflect honesty than dishonesty. Specifically, we point out (1) that there is no evidence of a relation between Impression Management and (in-)authenticity, (2) that respondents in anonymous online studies have no reason to be inauthentic, and (3) that laypersons' judgments about Lie scale responses (especially responses that are extremely rare) are uninformative and thus yield no insight on the construct validity of the Lie scale. We finally reiterate the warning that conclusions based on the incorrect interpretation of Impression Management, Social Desirability, or Lie scales in low-stakes settings are invalid.

Keywords: Honesty, Authenticity, Lie scale, Impression Management, Social Desirability, Unlikely Virtues

The interpretation of Impression Management (IM), Social Desirability, and Lie scales has been a contentious issue among researchers. In line with the initial idea of such scales, some researchers continue to claim that responding '*yes*' on items such as 'Do you always practice what you preach' and '*no*' on items such as 'Have you ever cheated at a game?' (two items of the Lie scale; Eysenck, Eysenck, & Barrett, 1985) are indicative of *dishonesty* (Feldman et al., 2017; and hence the label 'Lie scale'), even in in low-stakes settings that provide little to no incentives for faking or dishonesty. We maintain that a tendency to affirm desirable (i.e., normative or moral) behaviors and a tendency to deny undesirable (i.e., counternormative or immoral) behaviors in low-stakes settings are more likely to be indicative of *honesty* instead (e.g., De Vries et al., 2017; De Vries, Zettler, & Hilbig, 2014; Zettler, Hilbig, Moshagen, & De Vries, 2015). Here, we illustrate why Feldman's (in press; Feldman et al., 2017) interpretation of Eysenck et al.'s (1985) Lie scale does not hold and why the resulting continued misinterpretation of Lie/IM scales in research and practice is worrisome.

In Study 1 of Feldman's et al. (2017) original article, high scores on the Lie scale (that is, a tendency to affirm virtuous behaviors) were interpreted in terms of low rather than high honesty. 'Honesty' thus defined was positively related to profanity use, which constituted the main message of Feldman et al. (2017). In our comment (De Vries et al., 2017), we presented evidence showing that (1) self- and other ratings on Lie/IM scales are positively related; (2) Lie/IM scales are positively related to trait Honesty-Humility (in self- and other ratings); and (3) scores on the IM scale and in particular on the item "I never swear" (indicative of low profanity use) are negatively—instead of positively—related to objective behavioral indicators of dishonesty.[1] These findings corroborate our conclusion that—at least in low-stakes settings—high Lie/IM scale scores are better interpreted in terms of honesty than in terms of dishonesty.

In response, Feldman (in press) stressed two main points: (1) high scores on the Lie scale should be interpreted as reflecting an inauthentic kind of dishonesty instead of an unethical kind of dishonesty and (2) laypersons interpret an extremely high Lie score profile as less honest than an extremely low Lie score profile.

With respect to the first point, Feldman (in press) did not provide any empirical evidence involving authentic honesty, which he defines as "being honest about and true to oneself" (p. 6). On the contrary, available evidence does not support a negative relation between authenticity and the Lie scale. In Wood et al. (2008), Authentic Living, defined as "behaving and expressing emotions in such a way that is consistent with the conscious awareness of physiological states, emotions, beliefs, and cognitions" (p. 386, sample items: "I live in accordance with my values and beliefs" and "I am true to myself in most situations") was essentially uncorrelated with IM (r = .05). Furthermore, the data in Study 1 of Feldman et al.'s (2017) target article were obtained in a low-stakes MTurk sample, in which respondents did not have any reason to be inauthentic. MTurk respondents frequently fill out surveys (Stewart et al., 2015), the results of which are not fed back to anybody interested in them personally. Consequently, there is no reason for MTurk respondents to self-promote "to appear *more desirable to others*" (Feldman et al., 2017; p. 8, italics added) and thus it would require far stronger evidence to falsify the more plausible assumption that Lie scales in such low-stakes (or rather: 'no-stakes') settings reflect authentic responses to questions about virtuous behaviors.

With respect to the second point, the alleged evidence is, unfortunately, entirely uninformative because it refers to laypersons' judgments of Lie scale scores, and, in particular, an extremely uncommon maximum Lie scale score. Specifically, laypersons indicated the truthfulness of an extremely low or extremely high Lie scale score. A maximum score on the Lie scale is extremely rare, which makes it easy to imagine why respondents

might consider it untrustworthy. In the De Vries et al. (2014) study, no single individual (0.00%) obtained the maximum possible IM score. In the study by Feldman et al. (2017), only three out of 307 respondents (0.98%) obtained the maximum Lie scale score.[2] Whatever the reasons for these three responses, correlations observed between the Lie scale and convergent constructs (e.g., Honesty-Humility; see De Vries et al., 2014) and criteria (e.g., actual cheating; see Zettler et al., 2015) are not driven by participants with such extreme scores. But more fundamentally, Feldman's (in press) findings that laypersons did interpret high scorers on the Lie scale to be less truthful is largely irrelevant to the construct validity of the scale—although it may explain why misconceptions of the Lie scale have persisted despite repeated warnings and growing counterevidence. The only way to examine the construct validity of the Lie scale is to correlate it with other measures of honesty (either ethical or authentic) using a variety of methods, such as self-reports, other reports, and objective measures, which all point to an interpretation equating high Lie scale scores to higher levels of honesty in low-stakes settings.

We should stress that our interpretation of the Lie scale has a strong basis in common sense. That is, people who claimed in Feldman et al.'s (2017) study to be virtuous (i.e., had high Lie scale scores) were found to claim that they do not often use profanities, self-reported using fewer swear words, and self-reported fewer swear words that they liked. A profanity use item 'I never swear' is actually part of the IM scale (Paulhus, 2002), a scale which is virtually identical—after correction for attenuation—to Eysenck et al.'s (1985) Lie scale. When following the IM and Lie scale logic, self-reports of *lower* profanity use in Feldman et al.'s (2017) study should thus be interpreted as reflecting lower levels of honesty, and thus should be indicative of *higher* profanity use instead! Note that when reversing the interpretation of both the Lie scale and the profanity use scale, honesty is negatively related

to profanity use, a position that we would endorse, even though we would disagree with the reversed interpretations.

Although we agree with Feldman (in press) that the interpretation of Impression Management, Social Desirability, or Lie scales is interesting and worthy of research, we must stress that all the available evidence—including the plausibility of assumptions made on how people respond to questions in low-stakes settings—contradicts that higher scores on Lie/IM scales are indicative of dishonesty. Lie scales are likely to be misinterpreted in research, as in Feldman et al. (2017), and misused in practice (see De Vries et al. (2014), for an example), resulting in even stronger misrepresentations in the media or—worse—in assessments of real people, something we all should be wary of.

Footnotes

[1] Taken together, the evidence suggests that (close) others are very well able to estimate whether somebody is likely to be high on dispositional honesty or not. Although it is probably true that close acquaintances are not much better at detecting *experimentally induced dishonest behaviors* in family members or partner/friends than are strangers (e.g., Morris et al., 2016), all evidence suggests that close others are better at estimating the likelihood (i.e., not necessarily specific instances) of *naturally occurring dishonest behaviors* (e.g., De Vries, Lee, & Ashton, 2008; Lee & Ashton, 2017).

[2] Any of these three may have been due to dissimulation (but more likely for other reasons than to 'appear more desirable to others'), but it may also be true that such uncommon responses reflect genuine piety or some form of autism which actually make people never cheat, lie, or swear (e.g., Baron-Cohen, 2007). Based on the extremely small subsample, it is impossible to tell.

References

Baron-Cohen S. (2007). I cannot tell a lie - what people with autism can tell us about honesty. In *Character: A Journal of Everyday Virtues*. Available at: http://incharacter.org/archives/honesty/i-cannot-tell-a-lie-what-people-with-autism-can-tell-us-about-honesty/

De Vries, R. E., Hilbig, B. E., Zettler, I., Dunlop, P. D., Holtrop, D., Lee, K., & Ashton, M. C. (in press). Honest people tend to use less—not more—profanity: Comment on Feldman et al.'s (in press) Study 1. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*.

De Vries, R. E., Lee, K., & Ashton, M. C. (2008). The Dutch HEXACO Personality Inventory: Psychometric properties, self–other agreement, and relations with psychopathy among low and high acquaintanceship dyads. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 90*(2), 142-151.

De Vries, R. E., Zettler, I., & Hilbig, B. E. (2014). Rethinking trait conceptions of social desirability scales impression management as an expression of honesty-humility. *Assessment, 21*, 286-299.

Eysenck, S. B., Eysenck, H. J., & Barrett, P. (1985). A revised version of the psychoticism scale. *Personality and Individual Differences, 6*, 21–29.

Feldman, G. (in press). What is honesty? Laypersons interpret high lie-scale scores as reflecting intentional dishonesty. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*.

Feldman, G., Lian, H., Kosinski, M., & Stillwell, D. (2017). Frankly, we do give a damn: The relationship between profanity and honesty. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 1-11. doi: 10.1177/1948550616681055

Lee, K., & Ashton, M. C. (2017). Acquaintanceship and self/observer agreement in personality judgment. *Journal of Research in Personality, 70*, 1-5.

Morris, W. L., Sternglanz, R. W., Ansfield, M. E., Anderson, D. E., Snyder, J. L., & DePaulo, B. M. (2016). A longitudinal study of the development of emotional deception detection within new same-sex friendships. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 42*(2), 204-218.

Paulhus, D. L. (2002). Socially desirable responding: The evolution of a construct. In H. I. Braun, D. N. Jackson, & D. E. Wiley (Eds.), *The role of constructs in psychological and educational measurement* (pp. 49-69). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Stewart, N., Ungemach, C., Harris, A. J., Bartels, D. M., Newell, B. R., Paolacci, G., & Chandler, J. (2015). The average laboratory samples a population of 7,300 Amazon Mechanical Turk workers. *Judgment and Decision Making, 10*(5), 479-491.

Wood, A. M., Linley, P. A., Maltby, J., Baliousis, M., & Joseph, S. (2008). The authentic personality: A theoretical and empirical conceptualization, and the development of the authenticity scale. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 55*, 385–399.

Zettler, I., Hilbig, B. E., Moshagen, M., & De Vries, R. E. (2015). Dishonest responding or true virtue? A behavioral test of impression management. *Personality and Individual Differences, 81*, 107-111.